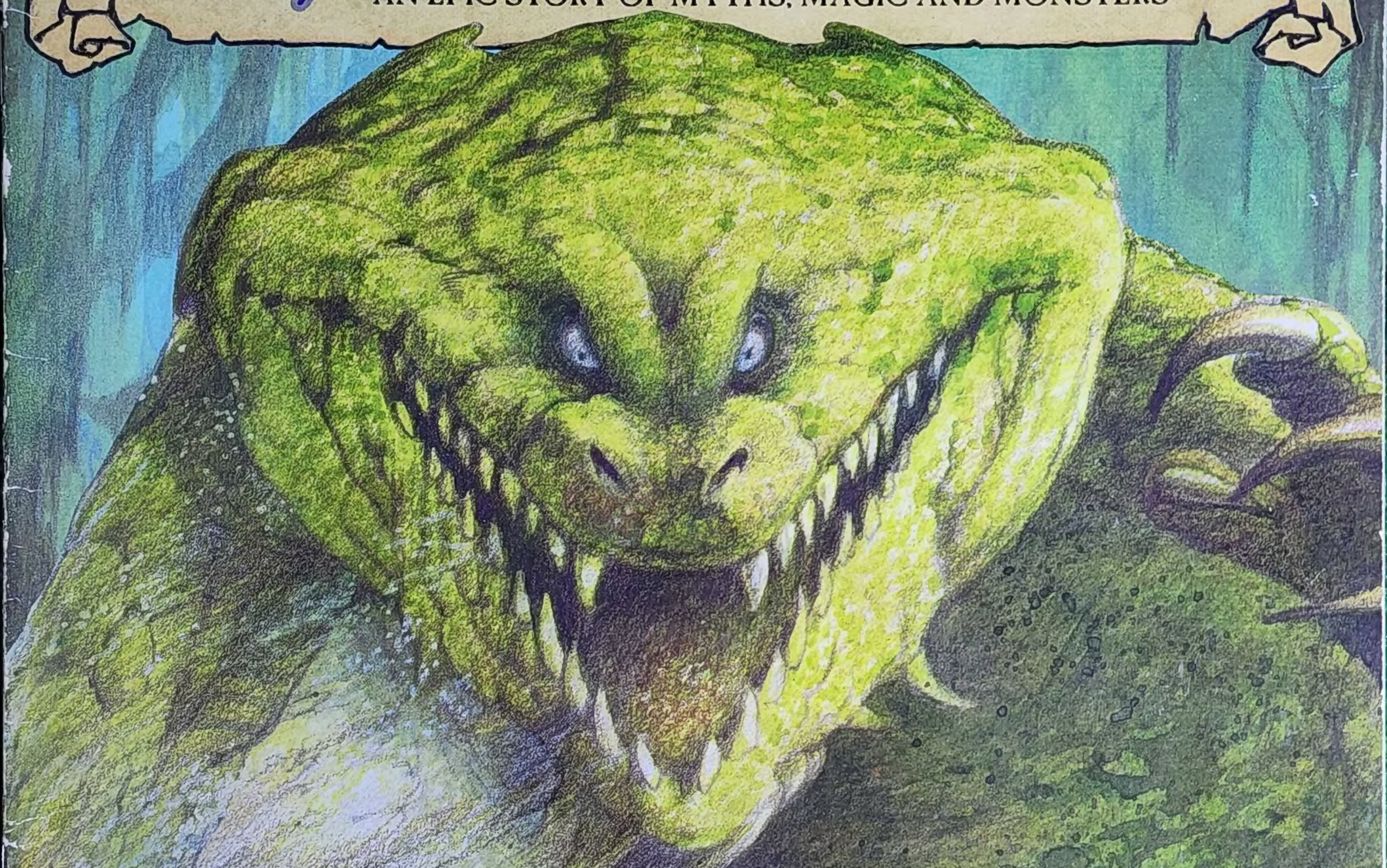
A MARSHALL CAVENDISH COLLECTION 1 IN FORTNIGHTLY PARTS

The Ancestral Trail

AN EPIC STORY OF MYTHS, MAGIC AND MONSTERS



1 The Moss Beast

In the Grip of the Slime River Ghoul

Julek Heller ®

UK £1.75 IR £1.95

Australia $4.50 NZ $5.50 Singapore $4.95 Malaysia MYR6.95 Malta £M1.50

From a story by Frank Graves

On the First Day . . .

Should evil e'er the Victor be,
And darkness fall upon the land,
A Chosen One from far will come
Who sees in dark and light.
On the first day, herein points the way.
To cross the river he follows the flow.
From air and water danger.
Safety lies in earth below.
At path's end lies the slender way,
A hidden weakness saves the day.

Deeper and deeper into the forest they went. As they pushed their way through the thick undergrowth, Orkan kept Richard spellbound with stories of his amazing bravery during the final battle and of his escape from the Evil One's forces.

Showing Richard a deep, jagged wound on his right arm, Orkan recalled how he was almost overcome by three of the Evil One's soldiers. "They attacked me from all sides, and one of them managed to slice through my fighting arm," he said.

"Urgh," Richard shuddered, looking at the deep scar. "I bet it bled a lot?"

"Mmm. It did," Orkan said rubbing over the scar. "I was lucky to escape alive. Many common beasts and other creatures died in that final battle. Many more were captured. Like those before them, they will fall under the influence of the Evil One's power."

Orkan's eyes grew sad as he remembered the fortress under siege. Inside, they were starving to death. Outside, beasts who were once friends and neighbours were lining up in their heavy armour and horned helmets waiting for their new master to order the attack.

Orkan escapes

"First, the attackers shot burning arrows over the perimeter wall," Orkan recalled. "There was no way of putting out the fires which blazed on almost every roof – we'd run out of water days before. The whole place was in flames. Then we heard a great clamour.

"The Evil One's forces were among us. They had dug their way under the battlements and attacked in force. Smaller beasts were just trampled underfoot."

Richard's eyes widened as Orkan stopped speaking. Orkan seemed totally lost in thought.

"How did you get away from the three who attacked you?" Richard asked curiously.

"One of them I felled with my sword as he swung his spiked mace at me. His helmet and chain mail covered him almost completely but I found a chink near his neck. As he went down his mace caught my arm and cut me almost to the bone. The other two were a bit slow and I managed to get both of them in the belly.

"Now any survivors are scattered around the land and I must join forces with them. There is still some hope."

Orkan fell silent. The going was becoming trickier. They were in some kind of valley, where the ground was wetter and slippery with damp moss. The forest itself was thinner, and large chunks of granite poked from the ground, their sides dark with moisture. The two slipped and slid their way down to the valley floor, where a fast-flowing stream wound its way down a rocky gulley.

"Wait! What's that?" Orkan held up his hand and Richard skidded to a halt. "There's somebody down there. Listen!"

"I can't hear anything," Richard whispered.

"Listen hard."

A new ally

Above the gurgle of flowing water Richard heard a distant sawing noise.

"Come on. Let's see what it is," Orkan said, starting off towards the sound.

With Richard close on his heels Orkan ducked and darted along the valley, halting every now and then with one ear cocked. Finally they located the source of the noise. It came from behind a large rock, the size of a small cottage, that stood by a stream.

As they peered round the rock, they saw an old dwarf-like figure leaning against it, snoring deeply. Before Richard could say anything, Orkan kicked the little dwarf and toppled him sideways.

"Who are you, and what are you doing here?" Orkan demanded.

The little man woke with a start. Then, eyes wide with fear, he turned to Orkan.

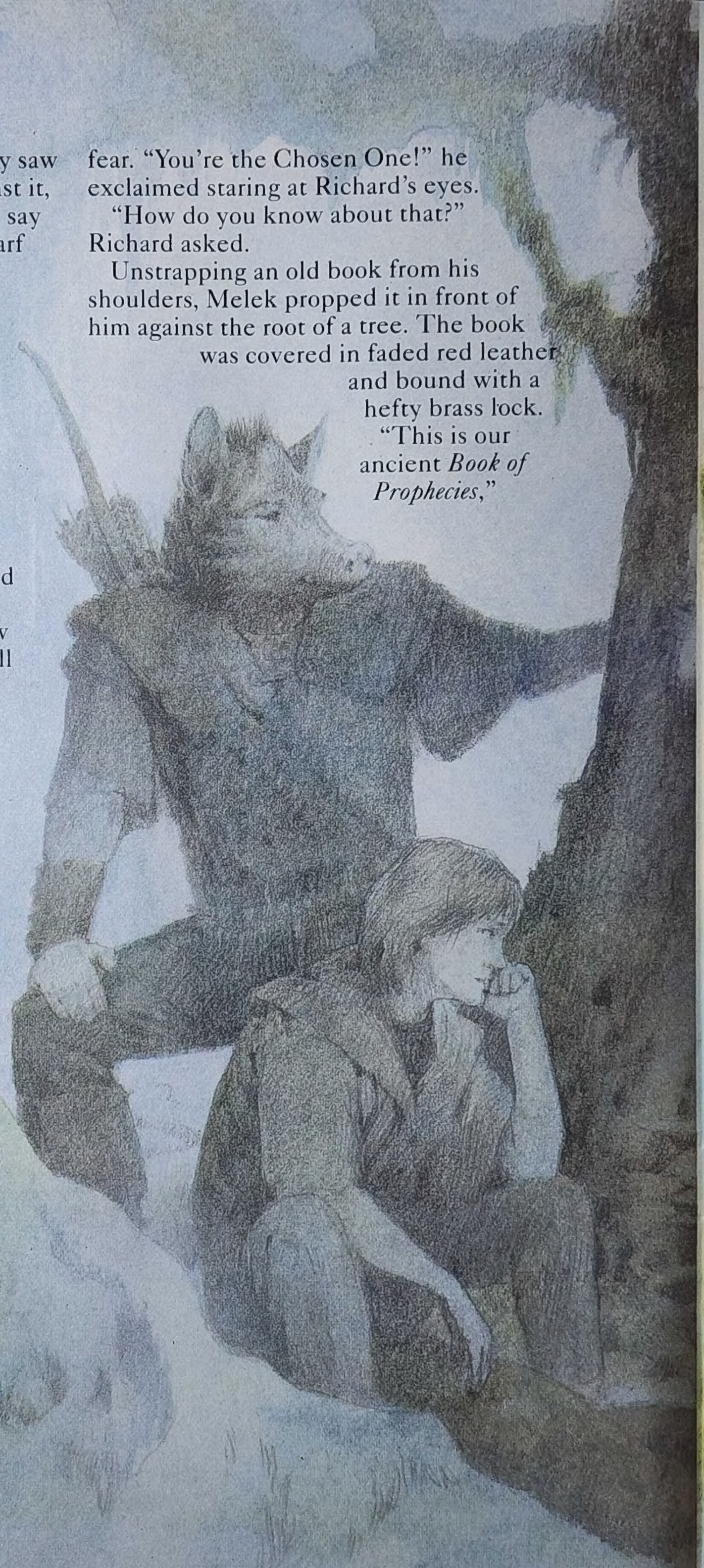
Book of prophecies

"I am Melek of Antona," the dwarf said. "I was a scribe in the library in the Ancient City. But now . . ." The little man broke off and hung his head dejectedly. He looked up at Orkan with wounded arrogance, then he saw Richard. The dwarf seemed to lose all fear. "You're the Chosen One!" he exclaimed staring at Richard's eyes.

"How do you know about that?" Richard asked.

Unstrapping an old book from his shoulders, Melek propped it in front of him against the root of a tree. The book was covered in faded red leather and bound with a hefty brass lock.

"This is our ancient *Book of Prophecies*,"



Melek said, opening it up. "I managed to rescue it from the library's vaults just before the city fell. It tells how the Chosen One will come and save us at our time of need."

Richard leaned forward, intrigued. He quickly told Melek about his meeting with Golan and asked, "What else is in the book?"

"Who can tell?" Melek shrugged. "There's a lot, but it's all rhyme and riddle. Only the Chosen One can puzzle the meaning. Even the Guardians could not unravel its secrets completely."

"What does it say?" Richard insisted, leaning to take the book from Melek.

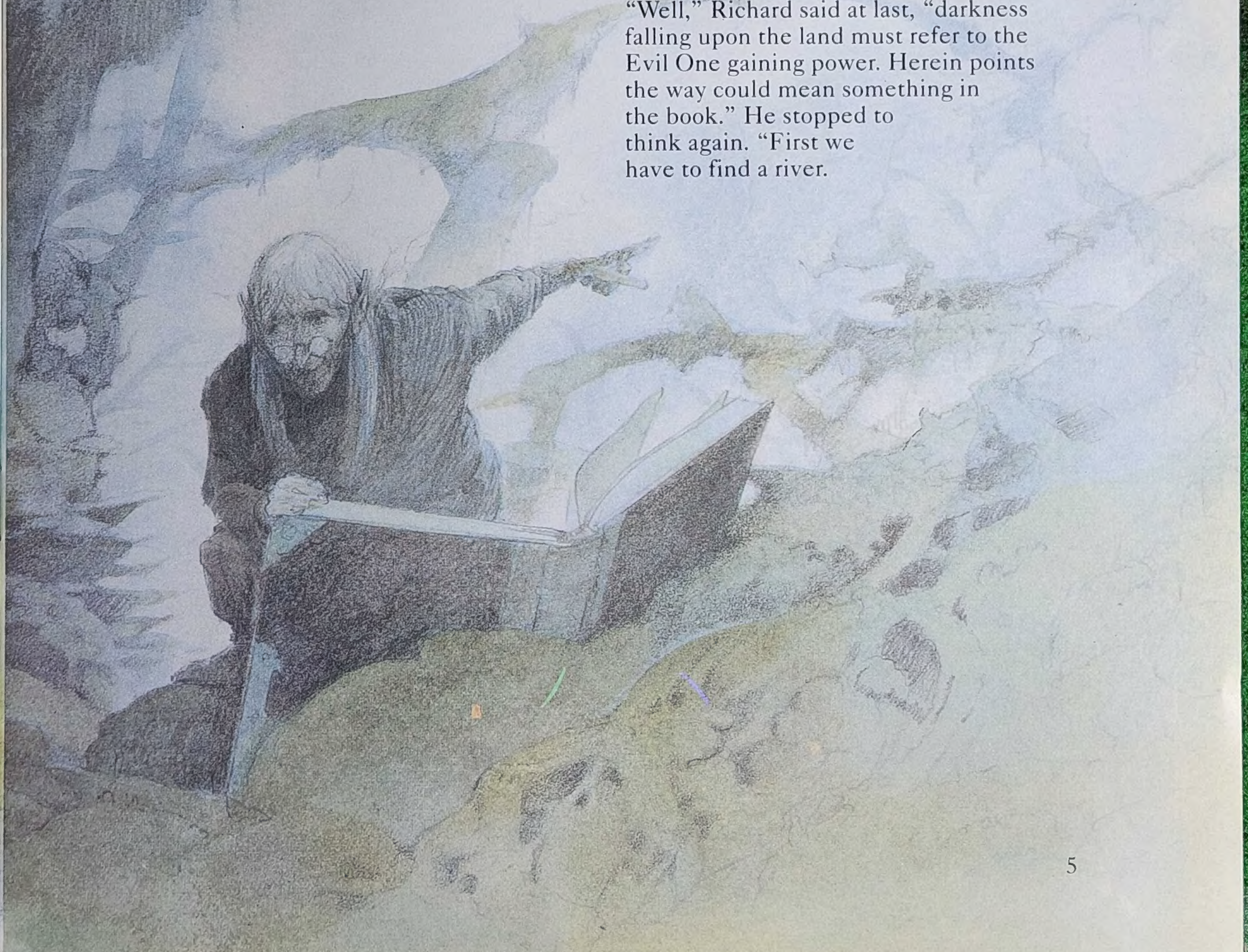
"Not too much," Melek said, gripping the book protectively. "I'll read you the first riddle.

Should evil e'er the Victor be,
And darkness fall upon the land,
A Chosen One from far will come
Who sees in dark and light.
On the first day herein points the way.
To cross the river he follows the flow,
From air and water danger.
Safety lies in earth below,
At path's end lies the slender way,
A hidden weakness saves the day."

Richard was completely puzzled. He may be the Chosen One, but this riddle meant nothing to him. He peered over Melek's shoulder and read the words again and again.

Unravelling the riddle

"Well," Richard said at last, "darkness falling upon the land must refer to the Evil One gaining power. Herein points the way could mean something in the book." He stopped to think again. "First we have to find a river.



I bet this stream leads into one. Let's follow it." Suddenly he felt a little more in control and he marched off with new determination.

The three followed the stream through the valley. Sometimes the going was easy. Sometimes it was treacherous, as they jumped from slippery rock to slippery rock. Eventually the valley broadened, the forest became even thinner, and a wide clearing opened in front of them.

"There!" Richard shouted, pointing triumphantly. The narrow stream widened and opened out into a river that looped lazily through the plain. Beyond the river lay red, thinly-grassed ground dotted with clumps of huge boulders, which looked just like little villages.

"Well, crossing the river will be easy," Orkan said, "there's some stepping stones leading straight over."

Richard had not noticed the stones, which marched evenly in narrow islands across the river. As the three wandered closer, Richard could see that the stones were a dark shade of green, and the water around them looked slimy.

Under attack

As Richard peered into the gooey mulch, he heard a steady drone, which grew louder and louder.

"Grapfrits!" Orkan cried. "Get under cover, quick!"

"Grapefruits?" Richard questioned as he ran alongside Orkan.

"No, Grapfrits," Orkan said. "They live

in the forest. They fly in swarms and can suck you dry in seconds. When they've finished your blood they go on to your bone marrow. Luckily they've got dreadful eyesight. So long as we're hidden we'll be okay."

"Remember the prophecy?" Richard interrupted. "Safety lies in the earth below." Even as he spoke the Grapfrits emerged from the forest behind them. Instantly, Orkan dived into a thorny bush to their left. Melek looked around in panic then disappeared after him.

Richard was left alone. The Grapfrits were bearing down on him and there seemed to be no refuge left for him. The buzzing noise was deafening.

"The tunic!" Richard thought suddenly. "Golan said it would conceal me."

Richard quickly pulled up the hood. For an instant everything went hazy, and then his vision cleared. He could see the Grapfrits approaching. He did not feel at all invisible. Anxiously, he clutched the amulet that Golan had given him.

Swarming blood-suckers

The Grapfrits swarmed over him and hovered around the bush where Orkan and Melek were hiding. The creatures seemed confused and they darted off in different directions. The air was filled with a rustling drone.

Suddenly Richard felt a tickle in his nose. He was going to sneeze. He tried to stop himself but could not. It was the loudest sneeze he ever heard. Instantly one of the Grapfrits swerved towards him. It hung right in front of his face.

Richard watched in horror as the Grapfrit's mouth swelled and a long, sharp, needle-like object slid out, jabbing hopefully right in front

of his left eye. Richard recoiled instinctively. The Grapfrit could not see him under the tunic, but clearly it could hear every sound. Then the ordeal, which seemed to last an eternity, was over.

The Grapfrits suddenly gave up. As if on command, they bunched together and droned back to the trees.

Orkan was the first to emerge from hiding. "That was a close one! We'd better move fast," he told Melek as the dwarf appeared from the bush.

Richard flung back the hood of his tunic. Again there was a brief blurring before everything came back into focus.

"Come on," Orkan said. "We'll use the stepping stones to cross the river. We don't want to wait here for the Grapfrits to come back again."

Melek held up his small hand. "The prophecy said nothing about stepping stones. I think we're meant to go under

the river. Perhaps we can find some sort of tunnel."

"Under? Go under the river?" Orkan scoffed. "Are you mad? Why should we waste time looking for a tunnel, when we can walk across here?"

"That's what the riddle suggests!" Melek retorted. "Think of the words: earth, below, hidden!"

Parting of the ways

"Look, the Grapfrits might be back any second," Richard interrupted. "We've got to get on our way. I don't see anything wrong with the stepping stones. I say we use them."

"Well I don't," Melek said huffily. "I'm going to stay on the path to see if there's a tunnel up ahead."

"All right," Richard said. "You follow the path. If you find another way we'll meet you on the other side." Yet as he spoke, Richard sensed that he heard Golan's voice warning him against this route. "No, can't be," Richard thought to himself, and shaking his head in dismissal, he headed towards the stones, with Orkan following close behind.

Melek, meanwhile, jogged down the path towards an old tree.

He wondered if he was making a fool of himself. He had not thought about what he might find, but whatever he had hoped for did not seem to be here. The path stopped abruptly beneath the tree. Beyond it lay nothing but water. Upriver he saw Richard and Orkan stepping gingerly on to the first slimy stone.

A LUCKY FIND

Melek tried to peer over the bank. He lowered himself over the edge, but the bank was steeper than he thought. Within seconds he was sliding out of control towards the water. He grabbed out to save himself. Melek's hand closed around tree roots that snaked out of the earth.

Hanging there, he was amazed to see that what had saved his life was not a root at all. It was a rope. An old piece of rope covered in mud, hidden against the dark earth of the bank and the tree's spindly roots. If he needed further confirmation that he was on the right track, the rope provided it.

Gripping on to the rope and wriggling in mid-air, Melek got another surprise. Deep in the bank he saw a hole. A tunnel under the river, he thought to himself.

Melek wormed his way down the rope until, almost on the ground, it suddenly went slack in his hands and he landed clumsily by the tunnel's entrance. As the rope slithered down on top of him, Melek thanked his lucky stars that it had not given way higher up. "A hidden weakness saves the day," he thought aloud.

INTO THE TUNNEL

Age and the elements had taken their toll on the rope but it had saved him from a nasty fall. Melek felt an odd compulsion to take it with him. He coiled it into a tight circle and gripping it in his hand, started down the tunnel. He ought to have been frightened, but somehow the

river itself seemed scarier than the unknown possibilities ahead.

It was slushy underfoot, but he could see fairly well. Light filtered down from the entrance, and there was a faint glow of sunshine at the other end. He hurried along, stooping to avoid the muddy ceiling and pleased that the river was not too wide. From above he felt rather than heard a curious scraping. Something was trying to dig down to get at him. He skidded and shuffled in the mud as fast as he could. Melek's heart seemed to be pounding in his ears.

To his relief the tunnel came out on dry land a little way from the bank. He emerged, mud-stained but triumphant, and looked for Richard and Orkan. What he saw rooted him to the ground.

The two had made good going, but like Melek they were glad the river was not too wide. Halfway across they had both become nervous about the water. There was something odd about it. It was too still, too dark, too ominous.

"I don't like this," Richard said.

"Neither do I," Orkan agreed. "Move faster."

"Look!" Richard suddenly halted. "There's Melek! He must have found his tunnel after all!"

"So get a move on," Orkan said. "This river gives me the creeps."

The monster stirs

Even as Orkan spoke, the water began to boil around them. The stones beneath their feet shook. Suddenly, the river seemed to be flowing backwards. A small wave was heading upstream towards them, discolouring the water with more, paler green slime, which smelled horrid.

Richard started to lose his footing as the stones rose out of the water, throwing him and Orkan into the slimy mess. Instantly, he realized they were not stones at all, but giant scales, on the back of something that was alive and rising higher into the air.

Spluttering and gasping for breath, Richard and Orkan tried to swim for the shore, but the water had thickened into a rank stew that made movement all but impossible. The more they thrashed about the tighter it gripped their limbs. Richard was a good swimmer but he did not seem to make any headway. It was all he could do to keep his head above the gooey water. As for Orkan, he was floundering.

"Keep still!" Richard shouted. "The more you struggle the sooner you'll sink."

A gruesome sight

Rather than keeping still, Orkan redoubled his efforts. Looking round, Richard saw why. Downstream, the water was bubbling like a giant jacuzzi. Then its raging surface erupted to reveal, bit by horrible bit, the most frightening creature Richard had ever seen in his life.

First to emerge was the top of the beast's head, dripping with slimy moss. Then came a pair of small, beady eyes followed by nostrils that snorted water in all directions. Worst of all was the mouth – a huge, gaping hole fringed with an array of razor-sharp fangs. Water poured from it in torrents, and Richard could just make out chunks of decaying flesh clinging to the creature's teeth.

Richard gaped in horror as he saw the creature's long, raking talons which oozed with fresh mud. Then, in a flash, he realized that the beast must use its claws

to pull itself along the river bed.

Somehow, Richard knew this fact was the key to saving their lives. But how? He and Orkan were still stuck at the monster's mercy. Or were they? There was something wrong here, but what was it? As his mind raced, the monster spoke.

Fearful confrontation

"Who dares ford the waters I protect?" The vile moss beast's words were accompanied by huge clouds of steam and a dank odour of decay. Its voice had a rasping, menacing tone.

"Feel the fear. You have transgressed on my domain and I shall destroy you."

"But we are only crossing this river. We mean you no harm. Wh-who are you?" Richard stammered.

The moss beast growled deeply as it eyed Richard. All of a sudden it gave a blood-curdling scream.

"Do you not know of Sumar and of the river she guards?"

Richard's eardrums felt as if they were about to burst. His head was ringing. Then the monster turned towards him. The huge head leered at him, and Richard suddenly realized what his brain had been trying to tell him. If her claws were above water, she could not move. Not, at least, if his guess about how she dragged herself through the mud was correct. If they were going to make a move, now was the time, but what move could they possibly make?

Melek made the decision for them. He too had been transfixed by the appearance of Sumar. But Sumar did not seem to have noticed him, and Melek guessed that even if she did, she would not be able to get at him on dry land. The only danger was if she lashed out at him with one of her talons. So long as he kept his distance, Melek reckoned he would be safe.

Running to the riverbank, Melek uncoiled the rope he was still clutching in his hand. "Here, you two! Catch this!" Holding on to one end of the rope, he threw the other out into the gooey water. It snaked through the air, slapping down over Richard's shoulder, and landed just by Orkan's right hand.

To the rescue

"Aaayghaaa!" Sumar bellowed in rage, and flung herself down into the water. Even as Orkan and Richard grabbed Melek's rope they felt the surrounding ooze shake. The moss beast was dragging herself towards them.

Melek hauled desperately, feeling for the first time the strength of the goo that held his companions. They seemed to be stuck fast. "Kick! Move your legs," he shouted, heaving harder and harder on the rope. "Try and loosen the grip of the slime."

They did as Melek suggested and first Richard and then Orkan suddenly popped free. Now that they were on its surface, the slime that had previously trapped them

came to their aid. As Melek heaved on the rope they slid easily across the slippery mass, which was by now almost rubbery in consistency.

They reached the bank just in time. Where they had been just seconds before, rose the monstrous figure of Sumar. A talon streaked out at lightning speed and embedded itself in the bank, narrowly missing Richard's leg. For a moment he stared horrified at the dank, scaly thing. Then it ripped back for a second strike.

The three ran as fast as they could. From behind came a chilling shriek of frustration. Then, quite suddenly, there was silence. When they reached a safe distance, they turned round. All was as it had been before. The forest rustled gently in a light breeze. The water was still again. A chain of dark green stones stepped innocently across the river. The air was fresh and wholesome.

A NEW DIRECTION

Gasping for breath, Richard felt the amulet around his neck. Now he recalled Golan's words when he gave it to him "I will be with you." He thought of Golan's voice in his mind earlier, warning him against the stones. Next time he would listen. He would think harder about the prophecy too. He had certainly got "the earth below" wrong.

Richard looked at Melek, "I don't know where you found the strength, but you certainly saved our lives."

"It was nothing," Melek replied modestly.

"Quite," Orkan agreed.

"What do you mean, 'quite'?" the dwarf snapped.

"Now you two. Don't start fighting," Richard said quickly. "I suggest that we get under cover while we decide where to go from here. We don't want to get caught in the open again." He turned and scanned the clearing.

"This way!" Richard said, heading for a clump of boulders. He reached them first and sat down between two enormous rocks. Melek followed just behind, and plumped himself down on the sandy ground.

"We should be safe here," Richard said breathlessly. "Where's Orkan?"

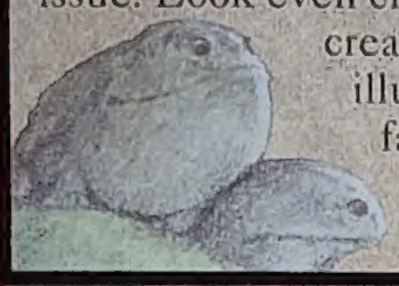
Melek looked at him in dismay. Cautiously they peered out from the rocks. There was no sign of Orkan – just a faint wailing in the distance. Nor could they make out any hiding place where Orkan might have holed up. He had simply vanished.

Shoomi's Sanctuary

Come into this ancient domain and use your powers of observation to find . . .

Shoomi and Shoobi

Shoomi and Shoobi are friendly little creatures from the Ancestral World. Look closely and you will find them hiding in the illustrations in this issue. Look even closer, and you will find more creatures concealed in the illustrations. Watch out for the faces, they often appear where you least expect to see them!



3-Minute Challenge

Mask of Evil

The Evil One has placed two fragments of his mask somewhere in the illustrations in this issue.

Can you find these fragments in less than three minutes?

Check how long it takes you to find the two pieces and challenge your friends to beat your time! Keep a note of your times and try to better them in the next issue!

Monsters and Magic

After you have enjoyed The Moss Beast, read your first stories from *Morbane's Book of Monsters and Magic*. Which of these monsters do you think Sumar is based on?

Check your answer in the next issue.

Competition

Find the source of the Evil One's power and win a special prize.

Power of Evil

With your first sections of map, you will find two blocks of letters. Keep them safe, and when you have 26, you will be given a clue to help you form the letters into a phrase which tells you how to destroy the power of the Evil One.

Competition details will appear in future issues.

Puzzle Map

Fit your first puzzle pieces on to the Ancestral World map poster.

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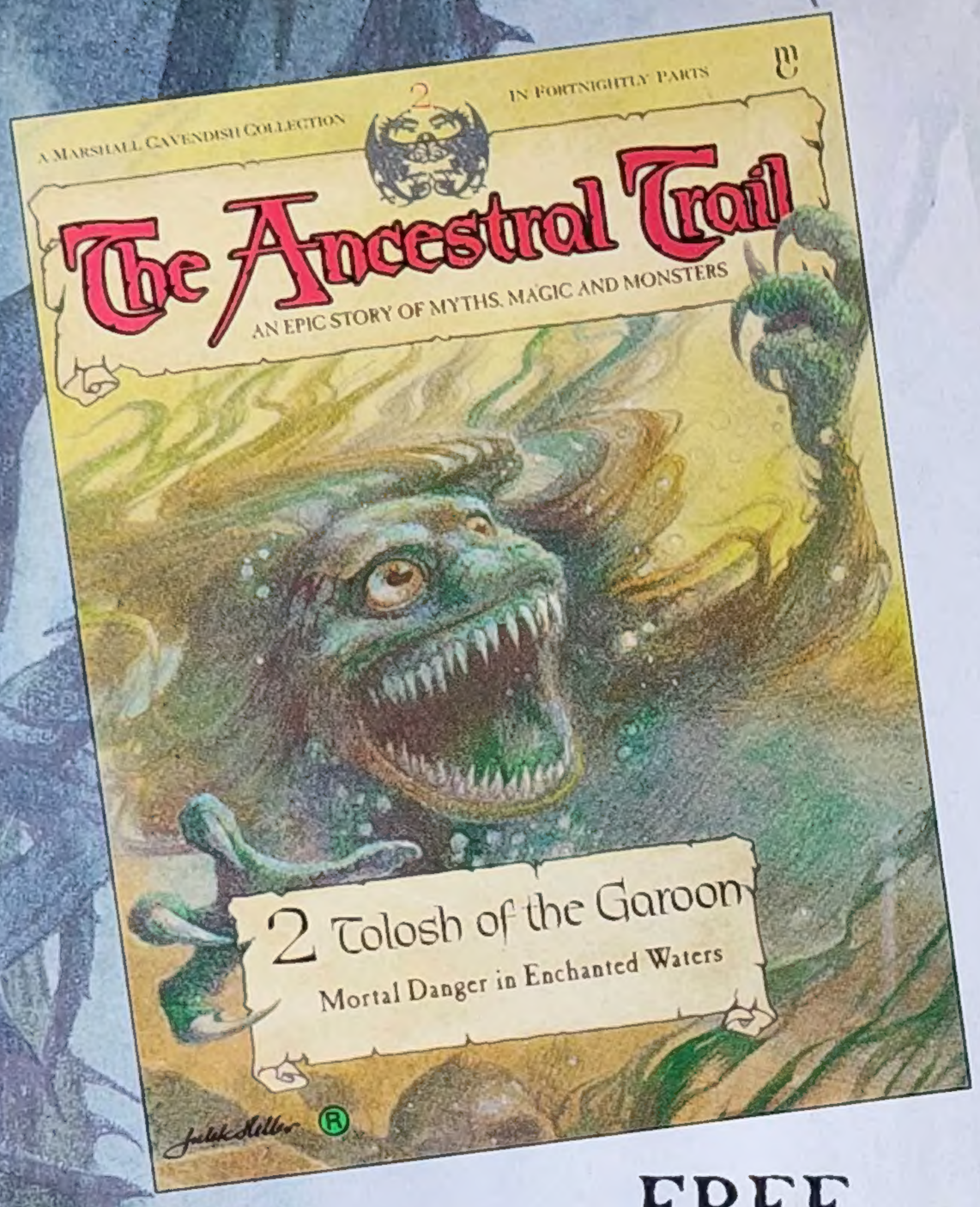
A MARSHALL CAVENDISH COLLECTION
2
IN FORTNIGHTLY PARTS
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2 Tolosh of the Garoon
Mortal Danger in Enchanted Waters

In Issue 2

Tolosh of the Garoon

A precious pod lies at the bottom of Lake Garoon. Will Richard and his companions survive their attempts to retrieve it?

plus

- More stories from *Morbane's Book of Monsters and Magic.*
- The map is growing! More pieces to add to your **Ancestral World** puzzle.

FREE

MONSTER MIGHT

Your first eight cards from **The Ancestral Trail** pack. Start playing **Pod Quest** straight away!

A *Monsters and Magic* folder to make for holding Morbane's story cards.

Coming in Issue 3

Baal the Giant Spider

A sticky end is in sight in Baal's cobwebby wood, as the daring trio fight off a monstrous spider and its evil ally.

plus

Locator cards and tokens for **The Ancestral Trail** role-playing game. From Morbane – a spider that creates storms and a weaver who is too clever by half.